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THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE OF FRENCH MUSIC

By JEAN HURÉ

IN a brief summary in a former study, I hinted at the progressive impoverishment, not of the French musical genius, but of its external manifestations, under various foreign influences during more than half of the nineteenth century. In perfect sincerity, many musicians and writers about music consider these influences as beneficent. French opera seems to them to have been regenerated by the Italian school and by the lucubrations, so well received in France, of the Germanic-Franco-Italian Giacomo Meyerbeer. Besides, people have wanted to "construct" fugues and symphonies after the style of Bach and of Beethoven; so they killed the admirable art of the fugue by creating the school-fugue. And they brought symphonic art to its death agony by teaching the realization of the Franco-Beethoven idea of the sonata, like a horrible mixture of healthy German beer with some light but strong French wine. Vocal art, so brilliant among the Italians, so sober and so perfect in truly French works, was abandoned for Wagnerian clumsiness; chromaticism, feverish and bristling, took the place of our pure and suave "diatonicism;" either disorder or tedious symmetry, whichever chanced, pervaded the phases of an art which in former days boasted of being at once well-balanced and imaginative. In all these ways was brought about the death of the French genius—but only the apparent death.

As I have said before, our historians first brought about the rebirth of French art by their documentary studies; the public all the while in revolt, had persisted in admiring it.¹ Then there arose a few geniuses, some a little Germanized, some tinged with Italianism, a few purely French. Their names are well known; they are justly famous.

¹ See *L'Art Poétique* of Boileau, where he speaks of the *Cid* of Corneille, condemned by the Academician, by literary men, and by Cardinal de Richelieu.

En vain contre le ciel un ministre se ligue
Tout Paris pour Chimène a les yeux de Rodrigue
L'Académie en corps a beau le censurer,
Le public, revolté s'obstine à l'admirer.

At last, under a new and unexpected influence, the musical art of France is finding again most of the qualities of the race, which it should never have abandoned. A whole new school has been born and is growing up. Its works are composed of sweetness, of a soberly emotional charm, of discreet and contained form, of elegance without triviality. In a style quite different and wholly original, there has been a natural return to the qualities of the Couperins, of Rameau, and of Charles Gounod. Even mediocre musicians at the same time have gained unforeseen riches—harmony and melody borrowed from antique modes, chords hitherto not used, free rhythms, varied and delicate timbres.

French musical art was born again. That it was born again is beyond all question, but it was reborn in a delicious and elegant disorder; or else it produced works full of unity but monotonous, where variety was entirely lacking—or where lack of variety was a fault—works in a so-called “restrained” style, where the musical vocabulary, though indubitably original and ingenious, was slight.

Creators of rare and distinguished beauty vied with one another in these delicate compositions. But the most precious of the ancient qualities were either ignored or forgotten. First, the fault which appears most strikingly in these contemporary productions is the non-continuity in the contour, especially in the musical idea in general. Let me explain my point. In most works of the present day, there is found—above a harmonic murmuring the purpose of which is, according to the current expression, to create an atmosphere—a little *motif* of one or two measures repeated twice; then the waves of the harmony, exquisite and enchanting, persist, and another *motif* floats to the surface, and then another, and so on to the end of the work. . . . ; these motifs bear to one another no relation either rhythmical or harmonic or melodic or tonal or expressive. . . . often the very intervals of the motifs themselves lack these very necessary relationships: the ear is repeatedly surprised and almost always shocked, by unforeseen obstacles which in the long run fatigue the hearer. This mass of jewels, often very precious, does not form a single object—a work of art—but a strange mass “which has no name in any tongue.” It doesn’t “hang together,” to use an accurate popular expression. There is incoherence—organized incoherence you may call it if you like, but incontestible incoherence.

This absence of harmony—I use the word in its antique sense—has numerous consequences. First, it produces a disconcerting quality which fatigues and enervates the bearer, which

causes a sort of anguish and unrest even in the midst of pleasure and of which the bearer soon tires. This succession of sensations, though lively and agreeable ones, when they are entirely disconnected, give the bearer with musical taste a constant sense of deception. It is a curious fact that in such music the unity and variety necessary to every æsthetic work can be found, but the unity is neutralized by the incoherence of the varied elements which are superimposed. Further, whatever seduction these works may have is ephemeral—the ear is quickly wearied with them. As Saint Augustine well said, “The sensation passes, the feeling of the harmonious proportions abides.”

Such is in brief the present state of contemporary musical art in France—or rather such is the music which, triumphant yesterday, seems to-day a little out of date, almost forgotten, despite its seductive qualities.

A younger school seems to be announcing itself, resplendent. It has furnished so far only attempts, but these efforts give promise of a fine future. It is not without interest to endeavor to sketch this new art, which is still stammering, but which to-morrow will be perhaps more magnificent than any other. Above all, the new art will carefully avoid the neglect of any of the marvellous elements in the musical art of preceding times. We can learn what these elements are by a profound study of the masters, romantic and classic, of the musicians of the Renaissance, of the ecclesiastical modes of the middle ages, of the modes of Greece, of the East and of the Far-East, and of the popular songs of all countries.

Does this mean that the works of the future will be imitations of the music of former days? Not at all. External means, musical material, will be widely used, but the works will not be copies. The modern artist will assimilate ancient methods; he will use them according to his own taste and his own temperament and he will renew them. As was said of La Fontaine, “In taking everything he imitated nothing.” The modern musician will regenerate the art of counterpoint, of canons, of the fugue; he will give to the sonata a new form, more closely *one*, more logical, more concise, more perfect in beauty than the symphonic form of older days, ingenious but conventional as that is. He will cultivate the art of writing for voices and will bring to perfection again the refined art of instrumental composition. He will invent harmonic and melodic combinations—chords, progressions of chords, tonalities never yet heard, undiscovered dispositions of timbres. His work will be essentially new; it will have above

all that harmony of proportions without which nothing can endure.

It will be modern. This is an important point. It is wrong to call all new music modern music. Modern music is that which corresponds to our modern mentality. Now, what actually is our modern mentality? It is a mentality which seeks every day in every field, more conciseness, more logic, more clearness. Proof of this may be found in all our social and economic organization, in our taste for the comfortable, our hatred for inconvenience and boredom, our love for agreeable sensations, our aspiration after serenity. The art of to-morrow will be an art of quiet and, as I have often said, quiet is the most æsthetic of passions. The art of to-morrow will be, like the science of to-day, made up of logic, of deduction, of simplicity in the midst of the greatest complexity. It will tolerate no useless element, no manifestation the expression of which could be more simple. It will detest fatiguing prolixities, tediousness, redundancy, sterile agitation, everything which can shock our sensorial eagerness and the logic which we wish to apply to that eagerness or the fancy which pleases us in that application. Like existing science, it will be bold and free, eager to dart in full flight over the highest summits, with a facility the greater because of the more perfect technical surety and æsthetic logic of the artists. It will be an art of perfect realization of ideals, an art of wider scope, an art disdainful of all prejudice.

The artists of to-morrow, the musician especially, will have to guard against one danger. Composed of so many differing elements, the music of the future may easily be lacking in sobriety and in unity if, forewarned, the musician does not take especial care to fuse and weld closely together his diverse parts; he must not be content to classify them in disorder or even to arrange them in a logical order, as has been done too often in very recent times, with the result that in one work elements borrowed from various styles followed one another instead of mingling in one whole.

There is, then, a great musical epoch which is destined to follow the pleasant band of present-day conquerors. We must greet this new dawn with sympathy and with hope.

(Translated by Marguerite Barton)